



Guyana

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Despite ethnic tensions, the generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 83,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 749,000. The country is religiously and ethnically diverse. Nearly half of the population traces its ancestry to the Indian subcontinent, and more than one-third of the population is of African descent. These two ethnicities, along with smaller native South American groups and persons of European and Chinese descent, practice a wide range of religions.

Official statistics on religious affiliation were not available; however, various sources estimate that approximately 42 percent of the population is Christian, including the following faiths: Anglican, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 35 percent is Hindu, and an estimated 8 percent is Muslim (both Sunni and Shi'a). Eleven percent practices beliefs that are grouped into an "other" category, including Baha'ism, Rastafarianism, and Judaism. Approximately 3 percent of the population does not profess any religion.

Members of all ethnic groups are well represented in all religious groups, with two exceptions--almost all Hindus are Indo-Guyanese, and nearly all Rastafarians are Afro-Guyanese. Foreign missionaries from a wide range of denominations are present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy/Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Members of all faiths are allowed to worship freely. There is no state or otherwise dominant religion, and the Government practices no form of religious favoritism or discrimination.

Beginning in 2003, the Government (as a means to increase revenue) began enforcing a law requiring all persons residing in the country continuously for 183 days or more in a 12-month period to pay income tax, even for income derived from outside the country. This law also applies to missionaries. However, missionaries are allowed to put their salaries derived from overseas into escrow accounts overseas to avoid paying the high Guyanese income tax and instead receive a maintenance stipend from the church. Missionaries can receive authorization from the Guyana Revenue Authority to be exempt from paying taxes on their stipends. According to the Government, the motivation for the enforcement of this tax requirement was not to limit missionary activity, nor is it applied in a discriminatory manner.

The Government recognizes religious groups of all faiths present in the country. All churches are required to register with the

Government to receive formal recognition. Registration is done under the Companies Act, although in the past, some groups were registered under the Friendly and Benevolent Society Act. Religious groups seeking to establish operations require permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs before commencing their activities. This permission does not allow access to the interior; for such access, all nonofficial persons not resident in the interior require special permission from the Ministries of Home Affairs and of Amerindian Affairs. The ministries review the scope of proposed activities submitted by a religious body and grant approval on a case by case basis. There is no formal monitoring of religious groups.

The following holy days are national holidays: Christian--Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas; Hindu--Phagway and Diwali; Muslim--the Prophet Muhammed's Birthday and Eid Al-Adha.

Both public and religiously affiliated schools exist, and parents are free to send their children to the school of their choice without sanction or restriction. The Government imposes no requirements regarding religion for any official or nonofficial purposes.

The Government has promoted cooperation among religious communities to address long-standing racial tensions. In early 2004, the President announced that the Government would provide financial support, including no-cost spectrum on the radio frequency band, for an all-faith television station; however, at the end of the period covered by this report, no proposal from religious bodies to participate had been submitted. The Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), a nongovernmental umbrella organization for Christian, Hindu, and Muslim organizations, has been mandated to work out the modalities for establishing such a station. The IRO's activities are very limited due to infrequent meetings, and not all denominations are represented in its voluntary membership. At the end of the period covered by this report, the IRO had not submitted a proposal to the Government.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) does not have a chaplaincy; however, efforts are made to coordinate with civilian religious groups to provide personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of all major faiths provide prayer and counseling, although generally only Christian sermons are given on GDF bases. Attendance at religious services depends on the discretion of individual commanders, although in many cases it is mandatory. Membership in a particular religion does not confer any advantage or disadvantage; however, general military practice tends to be biased in favor of Christians. For example, no allowance is made for Muslim observance of Friday as a special prayer day. Also, no provision is made for Hindu dietary preferences.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Although significant problems exist between the country's two main ethnic groups, tensions are generally racially, not religiously based. Religious leaders frequently have worked together to attempt to bridge these differences.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officials met on numerous occasions with leaders of religious groups and with foreign missionaries. The Embassy continued to pursue a policy of active engagement with the Islamic community. The Ambassador and other Embassy officials spoke before various religious groups promoting religious and racial harmony.

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